

**Commons Main Chamber Adjournment Debate**  
**Local Environmental impact of a Solar Power plant at**  
**Cleve Hill**

**Monday 9 Sept (approx. 10.00 – 10.30PM)**

**Introduction**

1. I would like to congratulate the Honourable Member for Faversham and Mid Kent for securing this debate on an issue which is of such importance to her and her constituents.
  
2. I can assure members that this Government is committed to both delivering our Clean Growth strategy to decarbonise the UK while growing our economy, and protecting and enhancing our natural environment.
  
3. We are leading action on both of these challenges, working to a net zero carbon commitment by 2050, and reinvigorating our natural environment through the 25 Year Environment Plan.

4. The Prime Minister recently emphasised that biodiversity and climate change are “two sides of the same coin” and must be addressed in tandem if we are to protect the planet. “We cannot stop climate change without protecting the natural environment and we can’t restore global nature without tackling climate change.”

#### Ministerial propriety

5. The proposed Cleve Hill Solar Park is a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) as defined under the Planning Act 2008. The application for development consent for the proposed development is currently being examined by an ‘Examining Authority’ appointed by the Planning Inspectorate on behalf of the Business Secretary.
6. I am aware that the Honourable Member for Faversham and Mid Kent has already made representations to the Examining Authority.

7. As she will be aware, the NSIP planning process is quasi-judicial and I hope she appreciates that it would not be appropriate for me to express views or comments on the merits or otherwise of the proposed development as this might be perceived as prejudicial to the determination of the live planning application.
8. As she knows, the final decision on applications for nationally significant energy infrastructure projects will be made by the Business Secretary. My department, therefore, has no involvement in the decision-making process for this application.

Opportunity for LAs and local communities to engage in  
planning process

9. I can assure honourable members that the NSIP planning process is open and robust and gives full consideration to the local and wider impacts of proposed major energy infrastructure developments. Legislation on environmental impact assessment requires that the developers of such projects must consider their effects on a range of relevant receptors including population and human health, biodiversity, land, soil, water, air and climate, soil, water, air, climate, material assets and cultural heritage.
10. Where a development is likely to have a significant effect on an internationally designated site, in taking decisions on whether to grant or refuse consent, the Secretary of State must also determine whether the project will adversely affect the integrity of the site.

11. It is important that local people's opinions on developments are fully considered. There are opportunities for local authorities and local communities to be heard at every stage of the NSIP process. It also includes consultation with a range of statutory and non-statutory consultees and stakeholders, including the Environment Agency and Natural England [both of whom are consultees in the Cleve Hill application].
12. I note that the Examining Authority has scheduled additional 'issue specific hearings' for the Examination and that the hearing next Wednesday will consider "Environmental Matters". I am sure the Honourable Member will be submitting her views to the hearing.

## Net Zero and government ambition on renewable energy

13. Members will agree that climate change science is clear that without a rapid reduction of our carbon footprint, our most valued habitats and species will be threatened by sea level rise, increased temperatures, and extreme events.
14. In June this year the UK became the first major economy in the world to pass laws to end its contribution to global warming by 2050.
15. The target will require the UK to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.
16. We will need a mix of energy generation sources to meet our net zero commitments and low carbon energy will play a significant role in that.

17. Yet our drive to achieve net zero must be aligned with our ambition to conserve and enhance the natural environment.

18. We remain committed, through the 25 Year Environment Plan, to leave our environment in a better state than we found it.

#### 25YEP and the Government's ambitions for the natural environment

19. This is why we are taking action to improve, extend and connect habitat, building its resilience to ensure our valued wildlife has the space to thrive and adapt to pressures such as climate change.

20. Already, we have designated over 7% of England's land area to protect our most rare and threatened terrestrial habitats, many of which are designated as internationally important for their biodiversity. We currently spend over £50 million per year through agri-environment schemes to support Sites of Special Scientific Interest.
21. Through the 25 Year Environment Plan we have committed to improving our protected sites and restoring new wildlife-rich habitat outside the protected site network.
22. The Nature Recovery Network, a key 25 Year Environment Plan Goal, is a new approach to coordinating resources and partnerships to deliver an expanding and increasingly connected area of habitat that is more capable of supporting rich, resilient wildlife. It will provide 500,000 hectares of additional wildlife habitat, more effectively linking existing protected sites and landscapes.



23. Restoring and expanding habitats is good for wildlife, yet nature recovery can also help us to mitigate and adapt to climate change.
24. That is why we are also investing in peatland restoration and woodland planting, contributing to climate change mitigation as well as providing important habitat for birds and other wildlife.
25. In April 2018, £10m of funding for peatland restoration was allocated to four large-scale peatland restoration projects in England; whilst in the Autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced £10m for an Urban Trees Challenge Fund, which has now been launched and is open for applications. £50m was also announced to help plant new woodlands through the Woodland Carbon Guarantee.

26. The England Peat Strategy will be published later this year. It will set out a new framework and approach for protecting and restoring English peatlands, to meet the needs of wildlife, people and planet.
27. We are also developing an English Tree Strategy which will consider changes to forestry ambition and policy in light of the Government's commitment to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.
28. In 2016 Defra Ministers approved the International Climate Finance - Blue Forests project, managed by UK Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Blue Ventures, to reduce deforestation of mangrove habitat, create new sustainable livelihoods, support community health and women's empowerment and increase climate resilience in coastal communities. This project is currently being implemented in Madagascar and Indonesia.

29. We also want to put the environment at the heart of planning and development to create better places for people to live and work. The Government's 25 Year Plan for the Environment announced we would strengthen biodiversity net gain in planning policy and consult on a mandatory approach.
30. This has been taken forward in revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework [in July 2018] to make it clear that developments should deliver biodiversity net gains.
31. Building on our commitment to consult on whether biodiversity net gain should be made a mandatory requirement for new development, the forthcoming Environment Bill will be used to mandate net gains for biodiversity through development in England.

32. While Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects are not within scope of the proposed mandatory requirement for biodiversity net gain, government wants to ensure that wildlife isn't compromised in delivering necessary infrastructure and is therefore continuing to explore approaches to net gain in infrastructure projects, including through the inclusion of clear policy on biodiversity net gain in draft National Policy Statement for Water Resources.

### Closing remarks

33. Once again, I congratulate and thank the Honourable Member for raising this issue, and all honourable members for the enriching debate.
34. It's important that local people actively engage with the planning process to ensure their views are heard, including on the environmental impacts of renewable and other energy infrastructure projects.
35. I am confident that the Planning Inspectorate and our colleagues at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, supported by expert input from statutory consultees, will consider all material matters carefully in reaching decisions on such schemes.

**END**

**Word count: 1,378 words**